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Mrs. Esther Kim Pak, M.D.

Korea's First Woman Doctor

DR. PAK

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PRICE THREE CENTS

Woman's Foreign Missionary Society,
Methodist Episcopal Church

36 Bromfield Street - - Boston, Mass.

Mrs. Esther Kim Pak

THE FIRST KOREAN WOMAN DOCTOR

IN the year 1876 a girl baby came to a poor family named Kim, in the capital of Korea. At that time there were no missionaries in Korea; it was known as the "Hermit Nation." Mr. Kim and his little wife called their little baby Chyom Tong (pronounced Chum Dong). In the year 1885 some American Methodist missionaries came to Korea, and began work near the place where Mr. Kim lived, and it so happened that Mr. Kim became employed by the Rev. Mr. Appenzeller, one of these missionaries, and thus he heard about the girls' school which Mrs. M. F. Scranton opened for the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society. Mr. Kim thought it might be a good place to put one of his daughters, as she would thus get her rice and clothes, and "perhaps the new doctrine there taught wouldn't harm her much"; so, fortunately for Chyom Tong, she was the one selected, and thus became a pupil in the first school ever established for Korean girls.

Chyom Tong proved very quick to learn, and soon surpassed the other girls in the school. She studied the Bible and catechism in Korean, and she also studied Chinese and English. Little by little she began to understand the gospel truths, and she learned to abhor

lying and stealing, two of the sins so common among Koreans.

Her Conversion

Cyhom Tong felt the need of a clean heart, and began to pray in secret for it. When she had been in the mission school nearly a year the usual rainy season came round, and it seemed as if it rained in greater torrents than ever before. One night as Chyom Tong lay in her room listening to the heavy rainfall outside, the thought came to her that perhaps the Lord was going to punish the sins of her people with a flood, as he did in the time of Noah, which she had just learned about, and she expressed this thought to her roommate, who said she was just thinking those same thoughts. Chyom Tong suggested that they get upon their knees and confess all their sins to God, and ask him to take them away and give them clean hearts, so they would not be afraid to die. This they did, and their simple faith was rewarded; God's own peace filled their hearts, and took away all their fears, and they fell asleep God's forgiven children.

The next day Chyom Tong told the other girls about the change which had come to her heart, and invited them all to her room that night to have a little prayer meeting. She decorated her room with flowers, and got some hymn books, and they sang and prayed, and had such a good time that they decided to do it

every night. Their Korean teacher, hearing about the meeting, asked whether she might attend, and then the other women came in and this was the origin of the first woman's prayer meeting in Korea.

The Prospective Physician

When Chyom Tong was about fourteen, Dr. Rosetta Sherwood was sent to Korea by the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society, to take up the medical work in the woman's hospital and dispensary, which Dr. Meta Howard had been obliged to leave the year before, on account of ill health. As the work had already been organized, and many patients had been waiting a long time to consult the woman doctor, she had to commence work in the hospital the second day after her arrival, with no knowledge of the language. As Chyom Tong by this time had outstripped all the other girls in her acquisition of English, she was sent to the hospital several hours each day to interpret for Doctor Sherwood, and together, with two or three other girls, the doctor taught her physiology, and later materia medica, while each day they received practical lessons in the dispensary in putting up drugs and learning to care for the sick. At first Chyom Tong liked the interpreting and the study better than the other part of the new work, and naturally rather shrank from surgery; but she soon learned to appreciate all, and after assisting at an operation for

harelip, surprised her friends by declaring she would like to be able to perform such an operation herself, and from that time on never gave up her determination to become a doctor, should God open the way.

Esther's Baptism

Sunday, January 25, 1891, Chyom Tong was baptized by the Rev. F. Ohlinger, and received the name of "Esther." As in Korea a woman loses her given name when she is married, and is called by none till she becomes a mother, when she is known only as "such a one's mother," the missionaries have to give the women and girls new names in baptism, and quite frequently they use Bible names; so the name Esther was chosen for Chyom Tong. Esther said her "heart felt very happy" that day, and she clearly showed she appreciated the true import of the service.

The following quotations from Esther's letters to Doctor Sherwood will give an idea of her style of thought, and show that a Korean girl's heart is not so different from that of an American girl, after all: "My very dear friend, I will tell you one story. You are an American people, and I am Korean girl, but I love you like sister, and I want you to please love like your own sister. Jesus is our eldest brother. I do right, then I am Jesus' sister, and you are Jesus' sister too. To-day I am full of joy; to-day

I shine very bright light." Another time she writes in a different mood, probably after some reproof: "You are wise more than me. I am unwise; please think I am unwise, and forgive me 490 times, my dear doctor. I am Korean girl, you are American lady. I know your heart a little, you know my heart very well, my heart is narrow, narrow. I cannot tell how much my heart is narrow. I get angry quick; my heart is just like your stove that gets red-hot so quickly. I hope my heart will become clear just like glass, and wide just like the world. God is our Father; he helps you and me all the time, and see your heart and my heart also. God sent you out to Korea, and sent me to this house, and I think God wants me to help you many years. Please do not forget me if you will be one hundred years old, or if you go to America."

Her Marriage

Time passed rapidly on, and Esther became sixteen years old; her father had died, her two elder sisters were married, and her mother and Korean friends became very anxious that Esther should be married, as most Korean girls are before the age of fourteen. As girls have to wear their hair in a long braid down the back until they are married, even the dispensary patients could not help exclaiming when they saw her: "Why, such a big girl, and not married; what can be the matter?" There is no such thing as

an unmarried woman in Korea, except the dancing girls, and perhaps a few so deformed or diseased that "go-betweens" cannot arrange a match for them. So though Esther feared marrying would interfere with her cherished idea of going sometime to America to graduate in medicine, yet she was so tormented by her relatives that she decided she would have to abide by the customs of her people. Her friends said that if the missionaries did not find a husband for her they would get one from the country; and as that meant a heathen, her missionary friends began to look around, and finally decided upon a Mr. Pak (pronounced "a" as in "par") a young man converted in Doctor Hall's work; so the engagement was arranged by a "go-between," as according to Korean custom husband and wife must not see each other until the marriage day. Doctor Sherwood's own happy marriage to Doctor Hall, though at first a great grief to Esther, later did much toward reconciling her to the idea of marrying, and she behaved very sensibly about it, as is shown by the following letter written to Mrs. Hall: "My very precious sister, how are you to-day, and my dear brother, Doctor Hall, is he quite well? I am well and happy. I was much pleased with your letter yesterday. You wrote much, and also many strange words. Now, I will tell you some strange words which I never tell. Do you know how my heart feel? Three nights I could not go to sleep, and feel troubled, because I never like

a man, and also I do not know how to sew well; but Korean custom all girls have to marry, have to be husband and wife. I could not help that, even I do not like man. If our dear Heavenly Father send Mr. Pak here, and make me his wife, I will be his wife. If God sends me anywhere I will go. I do not care about rich or poor, or high or low. You know I will not get married to one who does not like Jesus word.''

Making Rapid Progress

On May 24, 1893, they were married by the Christian ceremony. As Esther had never known any men before except Doctor Hall and a few other missionaries, it was no more than natural that she should have been at first rather disappointed in her husband, who, though quite as good and better than most Korean husbands, was of course rather different from the ideal Esther had gained from what she knew of American husbands. It was over a year before she could say she loved her husband. In the mean time, however, Esther continued faithful in her work and studies, and became more useful than ever. Veiling herself in the "green silk coat," she was now able to accompany the doctor often on her visits to the houses of the people, and as her style of hairdress now showed her to be a married woman, her earnest words were listened to with respect. She took up the study of instrumental music under the kind instruction of Mrs.

Jones and Mrs. Hulbert, and soon was able to accompany upon the organ a number of the tunes used in our Sunday afternoon services at the dispensary; she also proved an efficient leader of these meetings. Her medical training was not neglected; she became familiar with the Latin names of all the drugs in the dispensary, and compounded most of the prescriptions. She learned to administer the ether in surgical operations, and sometimes, when help was short, would hold the ether cone in one hand, and sponge the wound with the other. And thus she became familiar with the appearance and technical names of most of the diseases met with in a dispensary and hospital practise of six thousand cases a year.

As a Foreign Missionary

Korean people dislike living in any other place than that in which their family has lived for generations, but when Mrs. Hall asked Esther if she would be willing to go to Pyeng Yang, one hundred and eighty miles away, to work for Jesus, she replied: "I will go wherever Lord open the door for me; if he open door in Pyeng Yang, I will go; I give my body and soul and heart to the Lord; my body and my heart and my soul are all the Lord's things, and I give my life to teach my people about God, even if people kill me. I do not hope I get rich, or have many pretty things, but I want to work for Jesus most of all." So in April, 1894, she and her husband accom-

panied Doctor and Mrs. Hall to Pyeng Yang. Her missionary zeal was somewhat tried by her first experience with seasickness, but it stood the test. The following rather amusing account of this her first sea voyage Esther wrote to Dr. Mary Cutler: "I am in Pyeng Yang. We came here just to-day. I am very tired, but I want to talk to you just the same as if I were with you. I wish I could tell you all what I saw, but I am afraid I don't know how to spell these names. We left Mrs. Jones's house on Friday about eleven o'clock; we came to water, and went in a little boat and came over to the steamer. The steamer was very great and high, the very great steamer I ever saw in my life. Each side had kind of stairs made of wood and iron to help us come up. Mr. Pak and Doctor Hall helped me up. There were many, many men and dancing girls. Then we came up a stairs to our room. It was small and dark and bad smell. We were very tired, so we spread our beds and lay down. I do not remember what all, but I commenced to seasick. I had very bad headache, also heartache, and I vomit and vomit all afternoon and all night. I thought I was going to do die in the steamer, my mind was all gone. We all so seasick, therefore Doctor Hall called one of the seamen to help take care of the baby. Sunday we feel a little better, so we ate some gruel. On Monday we feel better, and we ate a little more gruel. We were on the steamer four days. O, we had a hard

time! On Monday afternoon we stop at Po San harbor, then we came on in a river boat. We lie down and try to sleep. We stay there all night. Mr. O., one of the earnest Christians from Pyeng Yang, came to meet us, and in the morning we read our Bible, and Mr. O. made such a good prayer. We got to Pyeng Yang that afternoon, and came in closed chairs to the house where Doctor Hall stops."

Brave under Persecution

Mr. Pak and Esther proved faithful helpers at Pyeng Yang. They were quite brave during those three days of severe persecution. Several Pyeng Yang Christians were thrown into prison. One day Mr. Pak was seized by his top-knot, beaten and kicked, and ordered to be carried off to prison, but Doctor Hall was able to rescue him, to Esther's great relief. Later, when the persecution had subsided. Esther proved efficient help to Mrs. Hall in opening the first Christian work for the women and children of this city of one hundred thousand people, called the "Sodom of Korea." After a month of most interesting and successful work the whole party were obliged, much to their regret, to return to Seoul on account of the war with Japan. After the great battle of Pyeng Yang was fought, Doctor Hall returned to follow up the work there, contracted typhus fever, and returned home to die. His last words were, to tell Mrs. Hall not to regret his going to Pyeng Yang, for

he said, "I did it for Jesus' sake, and he will reward me." Mrs. Hall decided it would be best for her to return to America for a season. Esther at once begged leave to go with her, and Mrs. Hall thought perhaps the opportunity had now come for Esther to pursue her long-cherished idea of studying medicine

In America

and receiving permission from the mission, and a little financial help from individuals, she decided to bring her. Hesitating to separate Esther for so long a time from her husband, who had not had so good advantages even in Korea as she had had, Mrs. Hall thought it wiser to bring both. On their arrival in America Mr. Pak gave himself most industriously to the study of English, and at the same time saved enough from his earnings to help his wife quite substantially in preparing for her medical studies. February 1, 1895, Mrs. Pak entered the public school at Liberty, New York. Various friends, believing in this practical form of mission work, boarded or paid for her board month about, and she made good progress in the schoolroom. In September Mrs. Pak entered the Nursery and Child's Hospital of New York City, where she was able to earn her way, and at the same time pursued her studies in Latin, physics, and mathematics, and thus prepared herself to enter medical college the coming autumn.

Esther's Pertinacity

Later, knowing that Esther had several

things to discourage her, Mrs. Hall wrote to her asking her whether she was not inclined to give up the idea of becoming a regular physician, and return to Korea with her. In her reply Esther said: "While I am here, I would like to have you live in America, but I cannot please only me; and also I do not wish to be selfish, and hinder your going back on account of me, but I like you to return and help our poor sisters before I am ready. I know God will send me a good faithful friend to help me. I do not have a mind that I will give up learning to be a doctor, if I can get into college safely. I know I will have no other chance if I give it up now, so I don't think to give it up, if it is the Lord's will. Also Mr. Pak wants me to learn to be a doctor more than anything. I will try all my best, and after I have done all my best, and can't learn, then I have to give it up, but not before."

In 1896 arrangements were made whereby Mrs. Pak entered the Woman's Medical College of Baltimore — the first Korean woman to take up the study of medicine. She obtained her degree and returned to Korea in 1900, Doctor Hall having preceded her by three years. During Esther's last college year her husband died in Baltimore of tuberculosis. During the first ten months after her return she treated nearly three thousand cases, amply fulfilling the expectations of her friends.

For ten years it was Doctor Pak's privilege to continue her noble work for

her own people, and she was always ready with trained skill and loving sympathy to help them in the dispensary clinic, the hospital ward, or in their humble homes. She was also of great assistance in the Bible Institutes for women, teaching most enthusiastically any subject required from hygiene to church history.

May 28, 1909, was a crowning day for her and for those who had tried to awaken a deep interest in the education of Korea's daughters as well as sons. That day the Woman's Educational and the Woman's Enterprise societies combined in showing honors to Korea's first women college graduates, Mrs. Esther Kim Pak, M.D., and Mrs. N. K. Ha, M.A. They were invited to the capital, and were conveyed by carriages in grand style to the old Mulberry Palace grounds, where addresses were delivered, appropriate gold medals awarded to each, followed by a collation. The picture of Dr. Pak, in her college cap and gown, adorning this cover was taken at this time; it shows the gold medal with which she was decorated, and of which she was justly proud.

But already disease had laid its fell hand upon our young doctor. After several years of a brave but losing battle with tuberculosis, she laid down her work here, April 13, 1910, to receive her coronation on high.

Who will take up her work? A work now so overwhelming it cannot possibly be met with a few foreign doctors! There

are ten thousand Christian Korean women and children who, in time of pain and sickness, should have the skilled care that you would want your mother or child to have, to say nothing of the six million heathen women and children who are also looking to us more and more for such aid.

There is but one solution to the problem, to reinforce the few medical women who are at present trying to cope with the situation so that a medical school for women may be established like that in Peking, and Korean doctors like Esther Kim Pak multiplied by scores and hundreds!

The Woman's Foreign Missionary Society when thus memorialized have replied that they would do what they could, and they are seeking the needed consecrated medical women. Do *you* not know such a one, or some one with the means to send her out?

"The Holy Supper is kept, indeed,
In whatso we share with other's need;
Not what we give, but what we share,
For the gift without the giver is bare.
Who gives himself with his alms feeds three,—
Himself, his hungering neighbor, and Me."

Condensed by the author from Chapter VIII of the "Life of Rev. William Joseph Hall, M.D.," Eaton & Mains.